



The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 53

OCTOBER 30th, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

In a recent Letter (No. 49) I urged that to understand the religious meaning of our situation we must open our minds to the voice of God speaking to us through outstanding events and facts. I mentioned in illustration the facts, first, of our deliverance as a nation from what appeared almost certain disaster; secondly, the degree of national unity; thirdly, that our people have shown unsuspected qualities in face of the emergency; and fourthly, that this has taken place largely subconsciously and waits for fuller interpretation in the conscious sphere. These facts have to be probed more deeply. I will not do more now than add another fact for reflection.

Before doing this let me utter a caution, which has wider application than to the matter in hand, against hasty and easy generalisation. It is a temptation to which we all, not excepting the Christian News-Letter, too readily succumb. I read, for example, not long ago in an article in the *Evening Standard* by Dean Inge that it is only terror that prevents the whole world from flying at the throat of Germany. I could not help wondering how he knows. Again, I have had in recent weeks one or two letters from correspondents who claimed (and stuck to their guns) to speak on behalf of the younger generation; but a little later I met several members of the same generation, of rather diverse types, who did not share these views at all. I am reminded of a conversation I had some years ago with an official of the State Department at Washington. He told me (what I already knew) that the Federal Council of Churches in America were in the habit of sending deputations to the State Department to present resolutions on international questions, claiming to speak on behalf of 18,000,000 members of Protestant Churches. "Well," he went on, "the curious thing is that we sometimes meet some of these 18,000,000 Church members ourselves and they somehow do not seem to have the ideas that the Federal Council say they have."

The further fact in the present situation to which I want to call attention is true, I believe, of wide circles, though not of course of all. It is a difference of temper between this war and the last. While there is, as there ought to be, the utmost detestation of Nazi policy and conduct, there is also along with this a readiness to discriminate and to recognise that some Germans are the victims rather than the active agents of these evil forces. To confirm my impression I quote the following extract from a leading article in *The Times*: "Many people will remember the persecution during the last war of unfortunate residents in this country of German origin or German names, and the popular demand to 'intern the lot'. This time the spontaneous adoption by the authorities of a mass internment of aliens has provoked an almost equally widespread protest. People refuse any longer to treat all Italians as gangsters or all Germans as Huns." This fact, in so far as it is true, is of the highest importance. If this temper can be maintained, there is hope that when the time comes to make peace we may be able as a nation without

vindictiveness and with cool heads to address ourselves to the task of planning for the future. Therefore let us do everything in our power to foster and nourish this temper in ourselves and in others.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There has been a large correspondence about the Supplement by the Archbishop of York (C.N.-L. No. 41). Most of it came when I was on holiday and since my return it has not been possible owing to the interruptions caused by the double move of our offices to analyse it and digest it all. I hope before long to follow up some of the questions raised in the Supplement. In the meantime the following comment from a member expresses a point of view of which account needs to be taken.

"The point I wish to make arises out of the Archbishop of York's proposed basis for pledged Christians. Now I thought that was really excessively theoretical, concerned with our beliefs and what we want the world to do rather than with what we must do whatever the world does. In the last few months I have several times come across young people who want to turn their lives in a direction which seems to them right, and to symbolize this by some practical and specific change in their mode of living. I think people want responsible income (so far as possible—this is often the hardest), responsible expenditure, and responsible leisure. They want to pledge themselves to avoid so far as they can usurious investment or employment, and to take counsel about it with people whose moral insight they respect. They want (with more hope of success) to avoid expenditure on wasteful things and shoddy things, and things made at the cost of oppression, and to avoid passive recreations. And I think a lot of people would like a lead about these things from the Church, and it would seem more concrete than working for a new social and international order just by thought and propaganda. It seems to me that often our thought about a desirable order is extraordinarily hazy, when our conscience about what we must condemn is clear."

THE SUPPLEMENT

The writer of this week's Supplement is Professor of Systematic Theology in Edinburgh University. He spent a number of years in the United States. In the earlier months of this year he was in France in charge of the educational work of the Y.M.C.A. You will agree that the question raised in the Supplement is of the highest importance.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Deane

P.S. We are receiving a good many letters from members who have had a second reminder about their subscriptions and write to say that the money has already been sent. The explanation of this is the present irregularity of posts and, in some cases, the change of address. If you have sent your subscription, please ignore the reminder and accept the continued arrival of the News-Letter as an acknowledgment of subscription money.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, ARLOSH HALL, MANSFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.

OCTOBER 30th 1940

DOES GOD DEFEND THE RIGHT?

MY DEAR OLDHAM,

It is remarkable how many religious issues that formerly seemed of little more than academic interest have gradually or suddenly been made alive for us by the progress of the war. The situation in which we now find ourselves has forced our thinking into a number of unfamiliar channels whose waters had indeed often been stirred by various generations of our forefathers but which of late we had imagined to be the merest backwaters and of interest to the historian only. It has been a chief service of the Christian News-Letter to follow our thought into some of these new channels, making some attempt to chart for us their unaccustomed waters.

But during the last few months it has seemed to me that one theological question has taken precedence in men's minds over all others. It is a problem to which some helpful reference has been made in several recent News-Letters, yet I have not been entirely satisfied with the kind of answer proposed.

WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN FAITH PROMISE?

I may state the problem in the following way. As you know, I had the opportunity of witnessing the French collapse at somewhat close quarters. One day, early in May, I ventured to express to an acquaintance, a highly-placed chaplain of the Royal Air Force, some apprehension as to the future course of the fighting and the ability of the French army to check the foe at any point—a doubt which later seemed to be justified by the event. His reply was, "But have you no faith? Don't you believe in any of the promises?" These questions immediately raised in my mind another question, Does

the Christian faith really provide us with any kind of promise that the better cause will be the victorious one, or that right will triumph over wrong in this present world?

This problem remained with me during the whole of our remaining time in France, so that all other theological problems grew pale beside it. I took it to bed with me at night—in Arras, in Boulogne and finally in Rennes—and I woke to it in the morning. It was with me always as I said my prayers. For in those days the most fervent of all our petitions was that God would champion the cause of justice and true religion before it was too late, turning the scales against the powers that threatened to banish truth and justice from the world. And *how* men prayed during those terrible days! Frequently I heard the remark, "I pray these days as I've never prayed before!" And I read the same thing in letters from the folks at home. I believe that everywhere men's minds were haunted by the same question, Does our religion promise us anything about the triumph of justice in the present world? Have we any degree of assurance that God will give the victory to the better cause? I still believe this to be *the* theological problem of the present hour. It is stirring in the back of men's minds even when they have not consciously formulated it, and other theological problems still grow pale beside it.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

It so happened that in those days my daily use of the Bible found me reading the Book of Psalms, and I might almost say that for the first time I understood what that book was about. It seemed to me, as I read it, to be concerned with one problem only—and this was precisely *my* problem. The psalm-

ists are all the time surrounded by enemies. Occasionally these seem to be private enemies, but for the most part they are public enemies—enemies of Israel or of Jerusalem. Nearly always these wicked men seem to be getting the upper hand, and the psalmists urgently call on God to come to the aid of justice and liberty and true religion before it is too late. The problem of the Psalms, as of the Book of Job which I had read in Arras a few weeks before, is the apparent success of wicked men. And the boldness of the psalmists' approach to God is astonishing. Their cause, they protest, is God's cause; why then does not God champion it? "In God we boast all the day long, and praise thy name for ever. But thou hast cast us off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies. Thou makest us to turn back from the enemy . . . Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?"—this to the Keeper of Israel who neither slumbers nor sleeps! These words are from the forty-fourth psalm, and I confess that the day I lighted upon it in France God seemed to me to have gone sound asleep, so that I could make its prayer my own, glad that I had its authority for bolder language than I would otherwise have dared to use. Verse after verse of this psalm seemed unbelievably appropriate, as if written for the occasion.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

I noticed with some self-suspicion, however, that in those days I had a readier inclination to turn to the Old Testament—especially to the Psalms, Isaiah and Job—than to the New. Why was this? It was certainly not, as might be suspected, because the Old Testament allowed me to curse my enemies; for I was still as unable as ever to make the imprecatory passages my own. No, it was because the New Testament, though its faith in the ultimate triumph of right was stronger than ever, appeared to have so much less to say about the triumph of right *in this world*. In passing from the Old Testament to the New, we pass into a much more other-worldly atmosphere. The promise of victory is now for the eternities rather than for here below. The psalmists, for the most part, have no interest in promises made

for a future life. What is the good, they ask, of victory and vindication after we are all dead? "Wilt thou show wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise thee?" And in Isaiah, "For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down to the pit cannot hope for thy truth." It is almost as if these Old Testament writers were saying, "If in the next life only we have hope in God, we are of all men most miserable." But we know, of course, that it was only by the acceptance of the eternal hope that the faith of Israel was able to save itself. The time came when the nation lost its freedom, becoming subservient to pagan kings; and if it had not been able to distinguish between the earthly Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem "which is above," the faith of Israel could not have withstood the pressure of events. We know also that Israel was helped in this development of her faith by something she learned from Zoroastrianism, the religion of her Persian overlords.

Does this mean, then, that the Christian faith, as finally formulated in the New Testament, gives us no promise for this present world but only for the eternal order? Does it mean that, while we must indeed believe in the ultimate and eternal superiority of right over wrong, we can no longer, like the psalmists, trust in God for the victory of right over wrong on the battlefields of earth? It is well known that, in reaction against the liberal optimism of last century, there has recently been a tendency in many quarters to fall back on such a view. And it is significant that the protagonists of this tendency should have been the theologians of the country which suffered total defeat in the last war, these being apparently able to retain their faith only by taking refuge in something like complete apocalypticism, altogether surrendering the hope of earthly progress and relegating the fulfilment of the promises to what some of them call "another dimension."

Now what I found was that when I allowed this view in anything like its extreme form to dominate my mind, I could not say my prayers. One cannot pray without faith, and how can one pray for the triumph of the

right cause on the earthly scene, if one is not allowed to believe that God is in some way working to bring this triumph about?

MAY WE BELIEVE IN THE TRIUMPH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS?

It is necessary, then, to reach a balanced view, carefully distinguishing the promises that have been given to us from the promises that have not been given to us.

To begin with, it is clear that we must not ask for a "full assurance of faith" that God will give us the victory over our enemies in this present campaign or series of campaigns. The matter is not so simple as that. Christian prayer never dictates the terms of its own answer but must always be content in the last resort to leave the issue in God's hands. The grand process of history is on a scale far beyond the grasp of our finite minds, nor is the long-term strategy of God ever such as we can understand in advance, though we may sometimes think ourselves able to see its justification in retrospect. Our purposes, however noble they may appear to us, are never *His* purposes. Our cause, however just, is always far removed from the perfect justice of His. The only assurance we can ask, therefore, is an assurance that God is working for the triumph of the juster cause; so that the measure of our conviction that our cause is really the juster one will be the measure of our conviction that God is on our side.

But even then we must not ask that God will straightway give the victory to the better cause. That again would be to forget the divinely-ordained conditions of our present life and to identify the temporal with the eternal order. We know that here below the mills of God grind slowly. We know that God works in a mysterious way. And we can understand that it may be His gracious purpose to make us pass, perhaps time and again, through the discipline of disappointment, humiliation and defeat in order that His own plan may be fulfilled.

But the assurance we seem to need is the assurance that this plan does include some triumph of righteousness in the historical order of events, as well as its perfect triumph in the eternal order. We are far from

agreeing with "Mimnermus in Church" that

"Your chilly stars I can forgo,
This warm kind world is all I know."

The promised perfect righteousness of God's own Kingdom must always remain the sheet anchor of our hope. But we need to be able to pray not only "Thy Kingdom come" but also "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven"; and we cannot so pray unless we believe that even within the earthly order righteousness does exalt a nation, and that nations which give themselves over to evil are working for their own eventual downfall, because God is all the time in some way working for and with those that love righteousness and against them that do evil.

I would put the following question. If our confidence in the eventual triumph of our righteous cause is not so based, then how is it based? Is it based merely on calculations as to the size of our navy, the increased speed of our aircraft production, the superior skill of our pilots, or the likelihood of the entry of the United States into the war? If I follow this line, I find myself rebuked by every second page of the Old Testament, and particularly of the Psalms. "Through thee will we push down our enemies: through thy name will we tread under them that rise up against us. For I will not trust in my bow, neither shall my sword save me." "Some trust in chariots (= tanks), and some in horses (= mechanized cavalry); but we will remember the name of the Lord our God." "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes." This does not mean that chariots and horses are not important, or that human skill in strategy and staff-work is not important. No psalmist ever meant to imply that God helps those who do not help themselves; but every psalmist insisted that the final and long-range determinant was always something other than these, and that our ultimate hope and confidence must not be in our big battalions or in the help of man but in a God who loveth righteousness and hateth evil.

The solution of our problem thus appears to lie in some combination of the witness of

ancient Hebrew prophecy with the witness of the later apocalyptic (that is, other-worldly) period. The New Testament does not require us, in entering into its own promises, to discard all the promises of the Old. We need in these times the support not only of the Gospels and Epistles but also of the Prophets and the Psalms. The modern other-worldliness which has developed in reaction against the facile progressivism of the recent liberal period frequently gives the impression of being more extreme, more one-sidedly other-worldly, than anything we find in the New Testament itself. This, I believe, is partly because the New Testament so often speaks of the scene of the future Kingdom as being a transfigured *earth*, whereas we now hear rather of "another dimension;" and partly because many of the New Testament writers expect the Kingdom's advent so very soon, so that the interim given over to the indecisive warfare of good and evil is of the briefest duration, whereas we now hear rather of a triumph so remote and shadowy in its astronomic futurity as to defeat the ordinary capacity of the imagination or, alternatively, of a triumph that is merely "after death" and "in another life," as against a triumph before those then living "should taste death." For these reasons it may be that the need of combining the other-worldly hope with a faith in some purpose on God's part towards a growing triumph of His cause on earth is

more felt by us today than it was by some of the early Christians. That even in this present world we may have some foretaste of the blessedness of the Kingdom is a doctrine that will be accepted by most; but must we not believe that we shall have some such foretaste not only in our individual souls but also in the ordering of our earthly society, and that the Holy Spirit is working in the world not only towards the "growth in grace" of individuals but also towards a more gracious manner of corporate and social and international life? That such a movement of God's Spirit in history needs to be carefully distinguished from a merely humanistic belief in automatic progress is surely not a sufficient reason for denying its reality altogether.

I conclude by expressing again my belief that this problem, in one or other of its forms, is the leading problem in the minds of numberless people at the present time, and that it lies at the root of the prevailing uncertainty as to the relation of our war aims and war effort to our religion. Men want to know what hope and confidence they can have in *God* towards the accomplishment of what they believe to be our righteous purpose, as distinct from mere confidence in the bigness of our battalions and the skill of our own hands and brains.

Yours ever,

JOHN BAILLIE.

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